



Adventure seekers can reach speeds up to 100 kilometres an hour and heights of up to 25 storeys thanks to Ziptrek Ecotours five zip-line circuit from Mont Tremblant's summit.

TREMBLANT

Get ready for a treetop adrenalin rush

Tremblant's new zip line links summit to base

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SPECIAL THE GAZETTE

Higher, faster, longer. Adventure seekers have a thrilling new zip-lining adventure at Tremblant that can reach speeds of up to 100 kilometres an hour and soar as high as a 25-storey building.

Speed fans take note: The 100 km/h will be reached by only some people, depending on their height

and weight and the wind speed. And it's only for a few seconds. The ride is not at all scary, the literature says. You will be high above the treetops, overlooking Lac Tremblant and the Laurentian Mountains.

There currently are three zip lines operating down part of the mountain, but by the end of July, there will be five zip lines that cover almost four kilometres, all the way from Tremblant's summit to the pedestrian village at the base.

Ziptrek Ecotours is a sensational zip-line circuit that starts with a ride up Tremblant's scenic gondola in a group of six to 12 participants accompanied by three guides. Then,

the adventurers start near the top of the Duncan Express and Soleil ski lifts and descend mostly on the Versant Soleil to the southside base. Participants strap into harnesses, hook up to cables and glide down zip lines, one after the other. The lines are double, one beside another, so two people will be going at about the same time.

It sounds like a scenic mountain cruise, but it's more like a breath-taking flight with awesome panoramas — if you take the time to look while you are zooming down. Here are the facts: Two of the five zip lines are more than one kilometre long; they hover as high as 76 metres

above the ground; and zippers can reach speeds of up to 100 kilometres per hour (for a few seconds). There is an automatic brake at the end of each zip line, as well as attendants to help you unclip.

On a more pastoral note, the guides discuss the flora and fauna of the Laurentian landscape during the short hikes between zip lines. This new installation also has a green component: The infrastructures such as platforms were transported by helicopter to avoid excessive deforestation. And they are built of natural cedar and steel, without chemical preservatives or paint. Zip lining does not require

fuel-operating vehicles — you're strictly working on gravity — and the safety barriers on the towers use solar power. This is Ziptrek Ecotours' third installation, after those in Whistler, B.C., and Queenstown in New Zealand.

For details: www.tremblant.ca; tickets are available at the Centre Aventure at the gondola's base. Including the ride up Mont Tremblant by gondola, the complete three-hour, five zip-line circuit costs \$119 for ages 15 and over; \$99 for children seven to 14 (minimum weight 34 kilograms) and seniors, 65 and over.

Cruises offer enticing sampler of Northern Europe

Ports offer easy access to sights

RICK STEVES
FOR POSTMEDIA NEWS

Cruising in Europe's Baltic or North Sea can satisfy even an independent traveller like me.

Stepping off the gangway, I'm immersed in the vivid life of a different European city each day. I've toured some of the world's top museums, taken a Scandinavian-style coffee break while people-watching from a prime sidewalk café, lingered on a surprisingly sunny and sandy Baltic beach, and enjoyed some of Europe's most expensive cities on the cheap from my big ship home base.

In northern Europe, the cruise ports themselves are generally not pretty, but they are mighty — often it's an industrial or maritime area with any historic charm bombed to bits in the Second World War.

In many cases (including certain ports in Tallinn, Bergen, Oslo, and Copenhagen), they're right in the city centre and an easy walk from the sightseeing action. When they aren't, there's good public transportation into town.

And once you're in the heart of the city, the options are enticing.

Even if you have just eight hours in port, you can still ride a double-decker bus through London; paddle a kayak on a Norwegian fiord; stroll Copenhagen's car-free Strøget; gaze at the Rembrandts in St. Petersburg's

Hermitage, and walk in Lech Wałęsa's footsteps in the shipyards and cobblestone streets of Gdańsk.

I've taken several European cruises recently, and I've found the per-day cost for a mainstream cruise can beat independent travel — particularly in northern Europe, with one of the highest costs of living in the world. (While a cruise saves money on a trip to Greece or Spain, it's an even better deal in Norway — where hotel costs can be more than double.)

There's also the convenience factor: After a busy day in port, you can head back to the same cosy bedroom each night, without ever having to pack a suitcase or catch a train.

Lots of travellers don't like the idea of being part of the cruise-ship hordes. With big ships typically carrying over 3,000 passengers and everyone sharing their gripes online, cruise lines work very hard to avoid any congestion.

In four cruises I've enjoyed lately, I've been impressed by crowd management. There's hardly ever a congestion problem on board. In fact, very often I marvel at how empty the big ship feels — even though they are always sailing full.

In port, each ship dumps off thousands of cruisers, raring to have the best seven or eight hours possible.

Just off the gangplank, you'll find several options: Tour buses await those who signed up for ship-sponsored excursions — this is the standard option.

Hop-on, hop-off buses, which are designed for independent travellers, cost

about \$35 for an all-day ticket; they usually cover a 90-minute loop with a recorded narration, run every 20 minutes during the daytime, stop at a dozen or so major sights. Public buses connect cruisers with the town centre, as well as taxis (both standard and minibus — economical for small groups).

Some ports have a wide range of options. For example, if you dock at France's port of Le Havre, you'll be offered various trips into Paris, as well as guided visits to D-Day beaches and Impressionist sights closer to your ship.

In some cases, there's only one worthy destination, but it takes some effort to reach it. For example, from the German port of Warnemünde, it's a three-hour bus or train ride into Berlin.

It's possible to get to these places by public transportation — but the cruise line hopes you'll pay them to take you on an excursion instead.

If there are 3,000 tourists relaxing on vacation, it's because there are over a thousand crew members working day and night to keep them fed, watered, and clean.

I've always been pleased with the calibre of the crews on the ships. Most are from the developing world and work very hard for low wages plus tips to support families they left behind.

Cruising works well as an enticing sampler for northern Europe, to help you decide where you'd like to return and really get to know.

For travellers who prefer to tiptoe into Europe — rather than dive right in — this bite-sized approach can be a good way to get your feet wet.



PHOTOS: CAMERON HEWITT

Many northern European cruise ports, such as this one in Copenhagen, above, are located near the centre of the city. Poland's Gdansk, top, is often a port of call on northern European cruises. These brick buildings line the city's atmospheric riverfront embankment.